

Terra Contigua

Border Country

THE seventeenth century has been called the golden age of spiritual writing, a period when the English language seemed to have 'an element of the miraculous', an age that produced the plays of Shakespeare and the Authorized Version of the Bible, and spawned such poets as Milton, Donne, Marvel and Herbert. But the seventeenth century was also a time of social upheaval, when religious schism divided and fragmented a nation, which resulted in civil war and the execution of King Charles I.

This turbulent century also brought forth two of the finest Christian mystical poets in the English language, one seemingly unscathed by the cruel spectacle and personal terrors of civil war and religious persecution, since he was still a child, and one as an adult traumatized by them. Yet both rejected the prevailing belief that this was a fallen world, to be despised and rejected, a world in which natural beauty was considered suspect, a temptation of the devil, rather than an embodiment of the Lord. They were both born in the beautiful countryside of the Welsh borders and shared a sense of a living bond with the natural world. At their finest, both transmitted a visionary sense of the divine presence pervading the natural world. And crucially, both felt those intimations of immortality experienced in childhood—a century before Blake or Wordsworth.

They were Thomas Traherne, born and bred near Hereford, and Henry Vaughan, who spent little of his long life away from the vale of Usk in Breconshire, one the poet of the Wye valley and the other the self-styled Swan of Usk. Both wrote poetry that was sometimes commonplace, unlit by any flash of poetic insight, but both capable of lines of such radiance, they 'lodge in the imagination with the unforgettable impact, the haunting inevitability of pure poetry.'





Olor Iscanus — The Swan of Usk
Henry Vaughan

HENRY VAUGHAN was born in 1621 at Newton Farm in the valley of the Usk, near Brecon. He and his twin brother Thomas were tutored by Matthew Herbert before they went to Jesus College, Oxford, but Henry did not complete his degree; he was sent to London to study Law. However, increasing civil unrest forced him to return to Brecon. He probably fought on the Royalist side during the Civil War; Thomas, who was a Church of England priest, certainly did and it cost him his living at Llansanffraed Church after the Royalist defeat.

The war was traumatic for the nation, for Vaughan devastating: his younger brother William died of a war wound, many of his friends were killed or persecuted and his worldly expectations were shattered. Reduced to an intellectual and spiritual nadir, he turned his back on worldly ambition and, still in his twenties, devoted himself to his poetry and earning his living as a country physician for the rest of his life.

His earlier poetry was unremarkable. His second volume, *Olor Iscanus*, dedicated in 1647, but not published until 1651, was full of shadows, as though he were in a state of spiritual and philosophical flux. But in his preface to his next work, *Silex Scintillans*, at a time when 'I was nigh unto death, and am still at no great distance from it', and acknowledging George Herbert as his literary and spiritual influence, he found again his God: 'when I expected and had . . . prepared for a message of death, then did he answer me with life.' He also found a new voice, for again and again in these poems, the flint really does strike off the sparks. It is regarded as one of the outstanding volumes of meditative poetry.

And throughout these poems sounds 'The great Chimes and Symphony of nature.' It is here that Vaughan differs most from Herbert, in whose work nature is little more than a convenient source of metaphor; whereas Vaughan's conception of it is central to his religious belief. He records natural phenomena with a wonderful precision of eye and turn of phrase.

For him,

'each day

*The valley, or the mountain
Afforded visits, and still Paradise lay
In some green shade or fountain'*

And at night,

*'stars nod and sleep,
And through the dark air
Spin a fiery thread'*

The experiences that lie behind his work are various: the sense of regeneration from Sin, his sense of loss at the death of loved ones and moments of transcendence when the veil of mortality seems to lift, frequently coloured by a mood of wistfulness induced by his desire to reach some spiritual home:

*'I cannot reach it; and my striving eye
Dazzles at it, as at eternity.'*

And

*'There is in God (some say)
A deep but dazzling darkness; —
Oh for that night where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.'*

And there is his firm belief in the sanctity of childhood experience. A return to the mind and spirit known in childhood was, he believed, the way back to that communion between man and his Creator.

*'Some men a forward motion love,
But I by backward steps would move,
And when this dust falls to the urn
In that state I came return.'*

He died in 1695 at the age of 74.



*Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my Angel-infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought,
When yet I had not walked above
A mile, or two, from my first love,
And looking back (at that short space,)
Could see a glimpse of his bright face;
When on some gilded cloud, or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity.*



*Search well another world; who studies this,
Travels in clouds, seeks manna, where none is.*

*Men might look and live as glow-worms shine,
And face the moon:
Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night.*

*But life is, what none can express,
A quickness, which my God hath kissed.*

*Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
And passage through these looms
God ordered motion, but ordained no rest.*

The Resolve

*I have considered it; and find
A longer stay
Is but excused neglect. To mind
One path, and stray
Into another, or to none,
Cannot be love;
When shall that traveller come home,
That will not move?
If thou wouldst thither, linger not,
Catch at the place,
Tell youth, and beauty they must rot,
They're but a Case;
Loose, parcelled hearts will freeze: The sun
With scattered locks
Scarce warms, but by contraction
Can heat rocks;
Call in thy Powers; run, and reach
Home with the light,
Be there, before the shadows stretch,
And Span up night;
Follow the Cry no more: there is
An ancient way
All strewed with flowers, and happiness
And fresh as May;
There turn, and turn no more; let wits,
Smile at fair eyes,
Or lips; but who there weeping sits,
Hath got the Prize.*



*'Tis now clear day: I see a Rose
Bud in the bright East, and disclose
The Pilgrim-Sun; all night have I
Spent in a roving ecstasy
To find my Saviuor.*



The Resolve

I have considered it; and find

A longer stay

Is but excused neglect. To mind

Tis now when I see a Rose

But in the bright East; and disclose

The Pilgrim-Sun: all night long I

When shall that traveller come home,

Spent in a vain quest?

If thou wouldst thither, linger not

To find my station

Catch at the place,

Tell youth, and beauty they must rot,

They're but a Case;

Loose, parcelled hearts will freeze: The sun

With scattered locks

Scarce warms, but by contraction

Can heat rocks;

Call in thy Powers; run, and reach

Home with the light,

Be there, before the shadows stretch,

And Span up night;

Follow the Cry no more: there is

An ancient way

All strewed with flowers, and happiness

And fresh as May;

There turn, and turn no more; let wits,

Smile at fair eyes,

Or lips; but who there weeping sits,


Hath got the Prize.



*I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
Driven by the spheres
Like a vast shadow moved, in which the world
And all her train were hurled.*

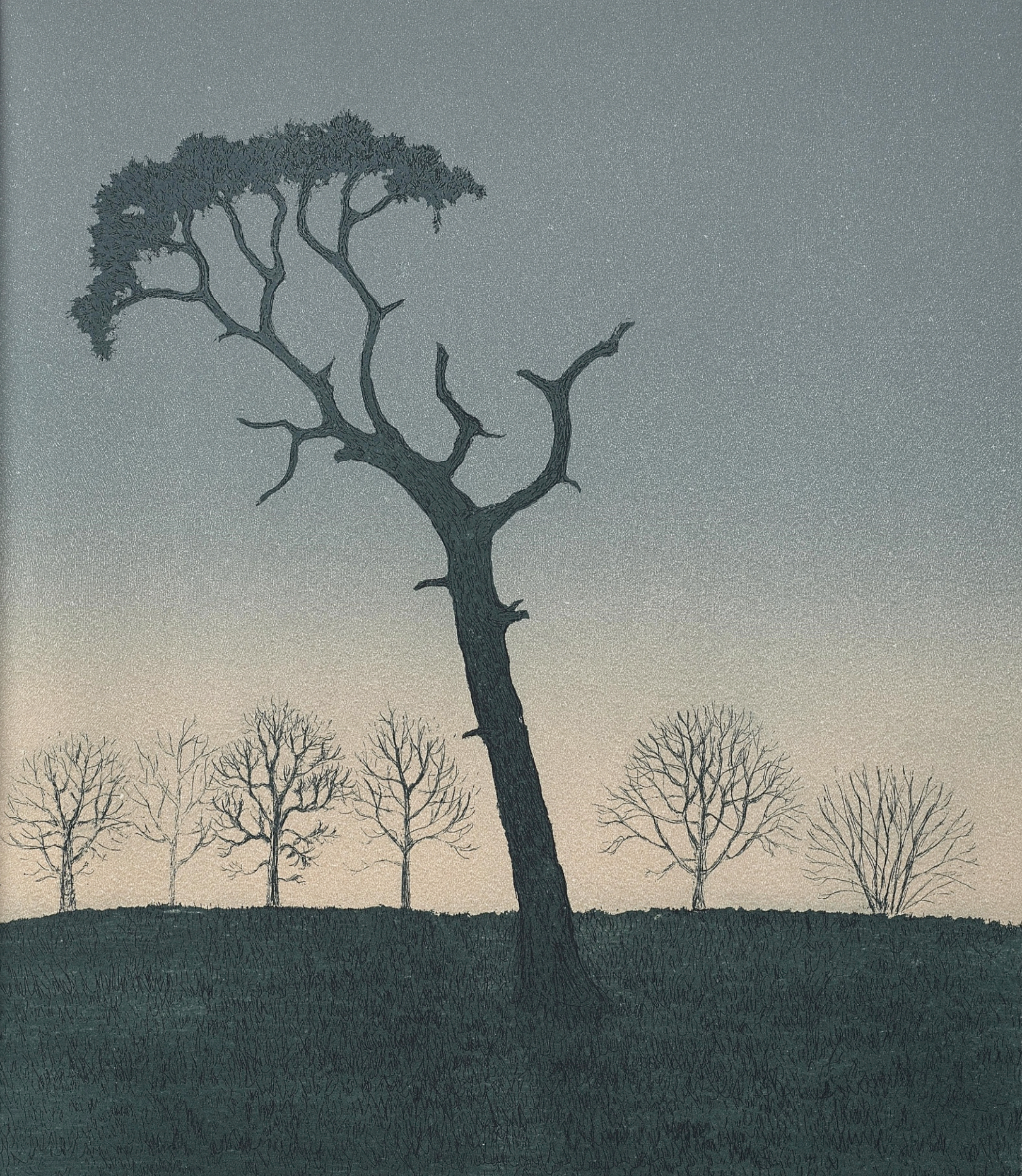
And all her train were hurled.
Like a vast shadow moved, in which the world
Driven by the spheres
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
All calm, as it was bright,
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
I saw Eternity the other night





*They are all gone into the world of light!
And I alone sit ling'ring here;
Their very memory is fair and bright,
And my sad thoughts doth clear.*

They are all gone into the world of light!
And I alone sit ling'ring here;
Their very memory is fair and bright,
And my sad thoughts doth clear.





*I will not by the noise of bloody wars,
and the dethroning of kings, advance
you to glory; but by the gentle ways of
peace and love.*

Thomas Traherne

JUST OVER a century ago two unsigned manuscript notebooks, one in prose the other in verse, were discovered on a London bookstall. First ascribed to Vaughan because of the strong vein of mysticism that runs through the writing, they were finally established as the work of a contemporary, Thomas Traherne. Only one of his works was published during his lifetime and another shortly after his death. Since that amazing discovery a century ago, there have been several others, surely the most dramatic being the rescue from a bonfire of his *Commentaries of Heaven* in 1967 though not identified until 1982.

Traherne was born in 1637, near Hereford, in the beautiful Wye valley. Educated at the expense of a wealthy relative, he took his B.A. and M.A. degrees at Oxford, and was presented, at the age of twenty-one, with the living of Credenhill, four miles from Hereford, where he remained an incumbent until his death. When he was thirty-two he moved to London as Chaplain of the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. He was a scholar, a theologian and a visionary.

His early poetry was probably written at Credenhill but his *Centuries* were his literary masterpiece. Sent from London to Susanna Hopton in Herefordshire for his friend's spiritual guidance, the manuscript consisted of four complete groups and part of a fifth, of a hundred numbered prose sections. They are a testament of faith, a complete expression of his most profound religious convictions and philosophy of dedicated joy written in lucid, metrical prose. They have a psalm-like quality of praise and thanksgiving and they express a kind of luminous spirituality, transmitting Traherne's childhood sense of living in an earthly paradise, surrounded by the beauty of creation. His natural response was to praise its creator.

Unlike most mystics, after he regained the vision of his infancy he seems to have suffered no drought of the soul. Like Vaughan, he wrote in an age of political turmoil and religious strife and he was also a royalist, but any dark night of the soul he may have suffered gave way to a spiritual regeneration that was permanent.

He wrote for a Christian audience, but the quest for happiness, which he preached, is universal and his call towards the infinite reverberates across all human experience. '*The world is not this little Cottage of Heaven and Earth. Though they be fair, it is too small a Gift . . . The World is unknown, till the Value and Glory of it is seen.*'

'Your understanding comprehends the World like the dust of a balance, measures Heaven with a span, and esteems a thousand years as but one day.'

His great message is the overwhelming importance of Love and the pursuit of that spiritual elevation he calls Felicity. His work displays great depth of thought, yet seems as spontaneous as a flowering of Nature. He could capture, vividly, the feel and flavours of childhood experience, and was so far from believing that this was a fallen world, he thought *'the stars as fair now as they were in Eden the sun as bright, the sea as pure . . . the lands as rich as they ever were.'*

Traherne is regarded as a Metaphysical poet, and a minor one: certainly his poems are not remarkable, but the rhythms of his prose are more reminiscent of the psalms of David than the poetry of his contemporaries. 'His is a singular voice that sings out to thrill and surprise, again and again.' And it was still a young voice; he died in 1674, at the age of thirty-seven.



You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you.

You never know yourself, till you know more than your body. The image of God was not seated in the features of your face, but in the lineaments of your soul. In the knowledge of your powers, inclinations, and principles, the knowledge of yourself chiefly consisteth. Which are so great that even to the most learned of men their greatness is incredible; and so divine, that they are infinite in value. Alas, the world is but a little centre in comparison of you. Suppose it millions of miles from the earth to the heavens, and millions of millions above the stars, both here and over the heads of our antipodes: it is surrounded with infinite and eternal space; and like a gentleman's house to one that is travelling, it is a long time before you come unto it, you pass it in an instant, and leave it forever.



Since Love will thrust in itself as the greatest of all principles, let us at last willingly allow it room. I was once a stranger to it, now I am familiar with it as a daily acquaintance. 'Tis the only heir and benefactor of the world. It seems it will break in everywhere, as that without which the world could not be enjoyed. Nay as that without which it would not be worthy to be enjoyed. For it was beautified by Love, and commandeth the love of a Donor to us. Love is a Phoenix that will revive in its own ashes, inherit death, and smell sweetly in the grave.

Eden


*A learned and a happy ignorance
Divided me
From all the vanity,
From all the sloth, care, pain and sorrow that advance
The madness and the misery
Of men. No error, no distraction I
Saw soil the earth, or overcloud the sky.*

*I knew not that there was a serpent's sting,
Whose poison shed
On men, did overspread
The world; nor did I dream of such a thing
As sin: in which mankind lay dead.
They all were brisk and living wights to me,
Yea pure, and full of immortality.*

*Unwelcome penitence was then unknown,
Vain costly toys,
Swearing and roaring boys,
Shops, markets, taverns, coaches were unshown;
So all things were that drown'd my joys.
No thorns chok'd up my path, nor hid the face
Of bliss and beauty, nor eclips'd the place.*

*Only what Adam in his first estate,
Did I behold;
Hard silver and dry gold
As yet lay underground; my blessed fate
Was more acquainted with the old
And innocent delights, which he did see
In his original simplicity.*





*The skies were mine, and so were
the sun and moon and stars, and
all the World was mine; and I the
only spectator and enjoyer of it.*

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*I knew not that there was a serpent's sting,
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Did I behold;

Hard silver and dry gold

As yet lay underground; my blessed fate

Was more acquainted with the old

And innocent delights, which he did see

In his original simplicity.






*Boys and girls tumbling in the
street, and playing, were moving
jewels. I knew not that they were
born or should die.*



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street, and playing, were moving
jewels. I knew not that they were
born or should die.





*The corn was orient and immortal
wheat, which never should be reaped,
nor was ever sown. I thought it had
stood from everlasting to everlasting.*

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wheat, which never should be reaped,
nor was ever sown. I thought it had
stood from everlasting to everlasting.

The spiritual writers of the seventeenth century 'tell eternal truths, and --- in our spiritually bewildered age, fill a dry well with clean, fresh water.'

David Scott

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